

# GASPARD

By Rene Benjamin--A Soldier of France

## SUMMARY OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

The mobilization call of August, 1914, comes to the little town of A—, in Normandy. With the contingent from Paris comes Gaspard, small dealer in the Rue de la Gaité in the Montparnasse quarter. "With a nose like a hook and a face that would make a fish laugh." He is the life of the regiment. The regiment entrains for the front. The men believe themselves straight on the road to Berlin. As they near the front they have their first hint of the devastating effects of war; peasants in flight, the smoke of burning villages, the distant rumble of cannon. Mistings beset them. Suddenly they find themselves in the midst of war with all its terrors. They meet a crowd of wounded soldiers returning from the front, exhausted, suffering pitifully. They pass through a field filled with the graves of the fallen. Shells begin to fall among them. They start to cross territory swept by German fire. Their commander, Capt. Puche, is killed. Himself wounded, Gaspard bears his dying pal, Barthelemy, off the field. Without having even seen the foe, Gaspard's first battle is over.

Then come days of misery and suffering while a trainload of wounded soldiers, including Gaspard, are slowly taken to hospitals far from the fighting line. Gaspard is assigned to a hospital in a little town in the south of France. For him it is a new world. In the description of the nurses there is a striking picture of the devotion of the women of France.

Recovering from his wound, Gaspard is sent to the barracks at A—, where he forms a queer friendship with a scholar, Prof. Mousse, late in the barracks falls on him. He arranges to return to the front and secures three days leave of absence, which he spends in Paris. There he decides to marry the mother of his son and thus legalize the boy's position.

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## VI.—Continued.

He told them wonderful stories of the exploits of the big French guns, and as he practically never stopped talking his three was everlastingly and they stopped for a drink with almost every acquaintance they met. He was in fine spirits when his mother, his wife and his boy went to see him off at the Montparnasse station. The railroad employee, after examining the soldier's leave, said:

"You're late . . . you're going to get into trouble."

"Did I ask you for any information? Mind your own damned business!"

His wife, however, had overheard the employee's remark. She became anxious. Gaspard reassured her.

"Didn't I tell you that I met a General? . . . Why, this leave is just like an excursion ticket; it can be extended for any number of days."

The women accompanied him through the gate and onto the platform, where the train was waiting. His mother took him in her arms and holding him close to her said in a trembling voice:

"Good-bye, my big boy . . . good-bye, my boy!"

The old woman did not go up to the train for a special ticket costing two sous was required, and it had been decided that she would wait with the boy while only his wife saw him safely in the train. He gave her a long, tender kiss and looked at her with all the pride of a newly married man. He was deeply moved himself, but seeing her worried look, he forced himself to smile and said simply:

"Don't worry, Bibiche . . . everything will be all right."

When he reached the barracks fifty-three hours later than the scheduled time the corporal exclaimed:

"Well, my friend, there is something in store for you!"

Gaspard assumed his most dignified air.

"Have I asked you any question? Mind your own business and don't be so familiar. Who do you think you are?"

The Adjutant came hurrying along. For two nights he had hardly been able to sleep for the thought of what he was going to say to the missing man.

"Well, it's coming your way, all right, and you're on active service, too! Court-martial and hard labor, that's what you'll get!"

Gaspard was still very dignified.

"I'll explain to the officers."

The Lieutenant soon arrived.

"Ah! ah! So here is the deserter . . . Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

Gaspard replied with the same dignified air:

"I want to speak to the Captain."

The Captain had been out at the front. He was a Parisian and a friend of Puche. For these reasons Gaspard had no fear of him. He lost his assurance, however, when he saw the officer, who gave him a very severe look.

"Captain," he stammered, "it's all the fault of the Major. I explained to them all about my leave, but they wouldn't listen to me and told me it was the only way I could straighten out my little boy's position. I couldn't go away with that thought in my head . . . I wouldn't like to have them say that if I should be killed at the front . . . Now my boy's name is Gaspard and if the Germans begin to overtake him twenty years from now, well, he'll be ready."

"The rule is there and it must be followed," said the Captain. "I will have to have you arrested."

"Captain," replied Gaspard, "I would like to return to the front at once to fight the Germans."

"At once?" said the Captain. "Well, you know, the trains are not running every three minutes, like the trolley cars back home in Paris. There will be no departure before ten days."

"You see, Captain, it was all for the sake of the kid."

"Yes, but yours is not the only kid . . . and then there is a story about a deserter. We have received a report. What did you do on your way home? Did you leave a gun behind?"

"I left my gun," said Gaspard. "Oh, the liar! I'll tell you, Captain, just what happened. You see, I was walking along. All of a sudden I turned around and saw this man coming along behind me. He seemed to be trying to catch up with me, so I kept on going right ahead faster and faster."

"I said to myself that if he thought he had something on me I would make him run for it. He finally caught up with me, but was almost exhausted after his long run. He said, 'Why are you running?' and I said, 'Because I am in a hurry.' Then he said, 'Why should you be in a hurry?' 'Probably because I am late,' said I."

"He didn't seem to like that and told me that I seemed to be trying to run away. Then he asked me if I was on leave. I told him, 'Of course I am on leave,' and then he wanted to see my papers, and then—"

"See here," said the Captain, "are you trying to make a fool of me, out of me just the same as you did to the gendarme? The point is, did you tell him that you would rather be a boche than a gendarme?"

"No," said Gaspard, "let me explain."

"No," that will do. First of all, you will go to prison and then you will see."

This was final, and Gaspard hardly had time to shake hands with Mousse, who had returned to the barracks in good time and had been greatly worried over Gaspard's absence. Gaspard spent the night in the prison and the next morning when he came out he looked as if he hadn't had a minute's

sleep. The men who had been with him said that he had cried almost all night and had kept on saying:

"There is no justice any more! It's a fine country to be working for! They throw you in jail just because you want to give your kids a name and a chance in life."

Gaspard's despair impressed the Captain, who said to him:

"Gaspard, you won't have to serve your eight days' sentence. There is a

have to know your profession, for with a face like that it's a sure thing that you have never done a real day's work."

"You told him that?"

"You bet I did!"

"And you seem to be proud of it too! Go on back to the prison, and quick!"

"But how about equipping the recruits?"

"You heard what I said. Back to prison you go."

While talking to the Captain he had recovered his good spirits, but he became deeply depressed as soon as he was locked up again. He came out of the prison, however, after twenty-four hours instead of forty-eight, as it had been decided to advance the hour of departure of the volunteers.

The Captain called him.

"You are going to start right away. Are you glad?"

"Right away? . . . Really? . . . Are you coming with us, Captain?"

The Captain understood and appreciated his sentiment and shook hands with him warmly.

"Come and see me when you get all your equipment ready," he said.

Gaspard was overcome with joy and forgot all about the prison. He had hardly left the office of the Captain when a note arrived from the Major, together with a report from the internal revenue officials, complaining that the soldier Gaspard had been found carrying a bottle of alcohol under his tunic and that he had been insulting to the inspectors who spoke to him about it.

This pleased Gaspard immensely.

"We are all good pals," he said.

"And we're going to go out and get the boches if we have to get killed to the last man!"

"Vive la France!" shouted the officer, and the men repeated the words in a long and powerful cheer.

The officer watched them pile into the third class compartments and then left them. In talking off his log

"Well, I should worry," said Gaspard. "Maybe you will worry later on, generally and said with a suspicious air: 'No, I don't worry.'"

"Well, why tell it to me?" exclaimed Gaspard. "Put it to music and sing it."

"That will do," said the sergeant. "Form fours and forward march!"

The wind blew the rain into the soldiers' eyes and in the distance heavy firing could be heard. Mousse had nothing to say; he felt a chill in his heart. The little group of men marched along through a small wood covered with fog and their steps could hardly be heard, so thick were the dead leaves under their feet.

Suddenly they turned into a main road where a battery of artillery emerged unexpectedly from the mist with horses, cannon and gun carriages. The horses were wading through pools of mud and water was dripping from the wheels. The men were ordered to protect their mouths as much as possible with their coats, which were covered with mud. But they looked nothing like the twenty infantrymen after they had passed them on the road, for the horses' hoofs and the heavy wheels had covered Gaspard and his comrades from head to foot with a thick layer of mud. They called out a protest to the artillerymen, who went on without stopping, riding their horses as though they were blind to their saddles and dragging behind them the squeaking gun carriages. They seemed to have little but contempt for these men who went to war with small rifles in their hands.

The twenty volunteers marched on silently for about fifteen minutes and

"You see, I'm going away and I'm smiling . . . and my pal, Monsieur Mousse, who is a real pal, you see, he's smiling too . . . It's just like a show: You take the tickets and you start all over again right away."

"They were only twenty when they left the barracks this time; it was no longer the imposing departure of a regiment, but merely a small detachment for a company at the front. But with Gaspard among the number even so small a group assumed an air of importance."

He was in the first rank, marching beside his pal, and once again he was going to battle with a smile on his lips and humming a merry tune. Mousse, who didn't know just how to feel, moved along with his friend wondering that this little insignificant band should suddenly assume so much importance to him, and he feared that he was never going to see it again.

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